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The Remains of the day

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Thesis for the Masters of Fine Arts Degree

**College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School for American Crafts
Rochester Institute of Technology**

Title: The Remains of the Day

Submitted by: David Fox

Date: September 29, 2009

Thesis Committee

Chief Advisor: Michael Rogers _____

Associate Advisor: Robin Cass _____

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School Chairperson Approval: _____

Abstract

In this thesis I will discuss my current body of work in regards to contemporary art and everyday domestic routines. Through this investigation I hope to draw out questions about self-reflection found in everyday visual cues within art objects.

Thesis Statement

I am interested in using absurdity as a means of developing skewed renditions of everyday objects and our interaction with them. For my thesis exhibition I will assemble mixed media sculpture and installations that depict an individual's experience with domestic objects and everyday routines. I will use blown glass as a formal element in contrast with everyday materials. My goal is to draw attention to how intimacy and perception is experienced through everyday objects and personal environments. This body of work focuses on domestic cleaning as a theme for reflection, literally and cognitively. By disrupting familiar notions of a bathtub or spray bottle, I am loosening the definitions of things we think we have figured out. These objects and places reflect our profound attributes as human beings. I want to offer viewers familiar and unfamiliar ways of thinking about daily routines.

Introduction

It is odd how the course of a domestic object goes from fame to forgotten simply by using it. An invention that is made for convenience is used to death, literally. I recently threw out my toaster because the elements burnt out. I went and bought a new one because I like having toast with my coffee. We rely heavily on the things we place in our homes. Whether they are for visual comfort or whether we physically use them for specific duties, these objects are critically chosen by us in order to reside with us. By using these things daily we become attached to them through repetition and necessity. We develop relationships with our utensils, our furniture and our appliances. In relating these object-relationships to human-relationships we can see that there is a correlation regarding how we treat these things. Relationships between people require communication, attention, dedication and commitment. One has to think about their relationship in order to stay in it. There has to be a constant willingness to care for the other person. After being married for almost eight years I can testify to this. Much the same when a person routinely uses an object they develop a relationship with it. They get to know how to use it, how not to use it, what it can and cannot do. Unfortunately, like some of our own personal relationships with others, we get lazy. We get tired and frustrated and most likely develop a habit of ignoring or neglecting. We end up developing a mental numbness to the things we use all the time. How often do you think about your toothbrush when brushing your teeth? Not only is it when a person needs a new toothbrush do they usually think about their toothbrush.

The work in my exhibition focuses on domestic cleaning both of the home and of our bodies. Cleaning can be thought of as an aesthetic act as much as it can be thought of as a household duty or mundane chore. We not only clean things because they are dirty but we do so because they look off putting because they are dirty. As an artist working in glass, cleanliness is a sign of good craftsmanship. It is a sign of precision and control. However, my intention is not to show my skills as a glass blower. Rather, I am interested in using blown glass as a formal material that has a clear reflective surface. To accomplish this I have to be a clean maker. While creating this body of work I discovered how the success of the individual pieces relied heavily on my cleanliness. Each piece not only addresses a domestic act, but also represents the inherent act of cleaning based on its creation. Cleaning beholds an object's true identity. That is why when we buy something we try to preserve the way it looks. We want that new look to last forever.

It is a choice to make something clean. It is also a personal ritual. Everyday I take a shower. I turn the hot and cold knob to a specific temperature. I step inside the tub and close the curtain. I flip the faucet lever and begin cleaning myself. Very rarely do I change the order of this routine. I do this daily activity because it makes me feel better when I am clean. We rely on cleaning mentally and emotionally as much as we do visually.

Investigation

The piece *Pedestal Tub* is the act of taking a bath manifested in a sculpture. It also serves as a pedestal with visual cues that act as reminders of the home. There are four sides that represent four steps to taking a bath. The top has a mirrored glass dome that reflects the viewer and the surroundings of the piece. The body of the piece is painted white with high gloss paint and is polished to replicate porcelain or enameled steel. Not only does the piece invite viewers to look, it also invites them to touch. However, it is not my intention for people to touch these works. I want them to remember touching something very



David Fox *Pedestal Tub* 2009

similar. I want them to automatically be triggered into thinking they are comfortable and in a place they know. Intimacy is heightened by touch. Touch can bring out memories and emotion. By using everyday objects in my work viewers are able to access these pieces through their own understanding and personal knowledge. When the order of these elements are rearranged, or taken out of context, the affect disrupts the viewer's experience of something familiar. By reordering the physicality of an act such as taking a bath, viewers are both certain and uncertain of what it is they are encountering. The viewer is left to contemplate an absurd yet familiar thing that may or may not do

something that they can predict all triggered by preconceived assumptions from memory.

In 1989 Charles Ray placed a bathtub vertically on the wall and filled it with liquid, which was held in place with a piece of glass. By taking a familiar object, changing its orientation and placing it on the wall, Ray has commented on how we look at everyday things.¹ Similarly, almost a century earlier, Marcel Duchamp placed a urinal upside down on a pedestal and signed it. He submitted the piece which he called *Fountain* to an exhibition which denied his entry. This historical challenge presented by Duchamp opened up questions of what we consider art and what materials we use to make art. It led the way for artists to redefine things. It caused people to look at things differently.²



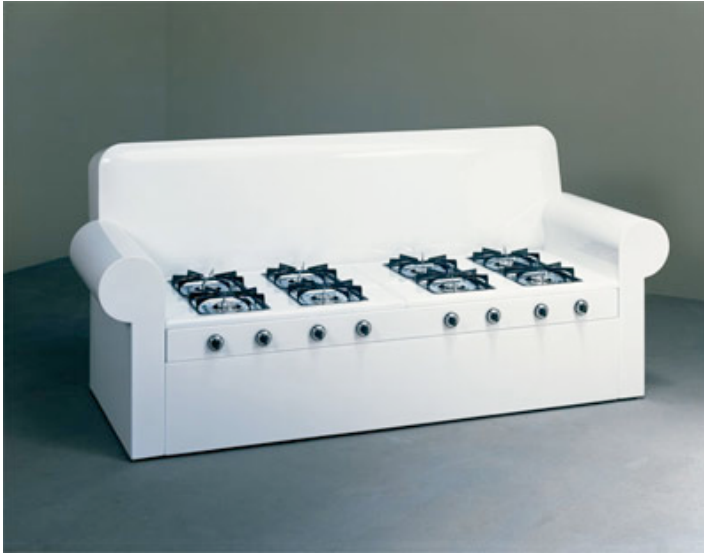
Charles Ray *Bath* 1989



Marcel Duchamp *Fountain* 1917

¹ Paul Schimmel, *Charles Ray* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998) 81.

² Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrahams, Inc., and Prentice Hall, Inc., 1999), 1085.



The collaborative artists known as Los Carpinteros construct furniture based work that deal with issues of social and political views with an ironic punch. What is intriguing about Los Carpinteros is their ability to

Los Carpinteros *Hot Sofa* 2001 take everyday furniture design and conceptually rearrange it.³ The piece *Hot Sofa*, is a white couch made to look like a working stovetop. It becomes two things at once, making the viewer look back and forth at each concept. Viewers are left imagining what it would be like to sit down, and turn it on. Willie Cole uses recycled materials to make sculptural forms reminiscent of furniture and masks. He is known for using anything from shoes to bicycles parts to hairdryers. Cole assembles multiples of one particular thing or assembles many parts of one item to construct three dimensional works. Cole's work exemplifies the



Willie Cole *Loveseat* 2007 use of many objects as a whole greater than its individual parts. However these parts are vital to the implications and statements Cole wishes to address. By

³ Brian Dillon et al., *Psycho Buildings: Artists take on Architecture* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2008), 86-97.

using readily familiar things and grouping them together they are transformed and re-contextualized.⁴

By reminding viewers of the mass-produced things in this world, artists have the power to communicate visual ideas and personal statements simply by repeating statements. The works presented in *The Remains of the Day* all have a familiarity to them. Some have mass-produced elements and some look like mass-produced items. *Lather* is a large installation consisting of over 400 blown glass bubbles hanging on the wall and sitting on the floor.

Each bubble is painted white on the inside and is randomly placed. There are roughly three sizes ranging from 3 to 12 inches in diameter and each piece is different. These pieces look like many things, as viewers have told me. They look like wall and ceiling lights, doorknob stops, smoke detectors and electrical fixtures. White glass has the ability to look like plastic or porcelain when lit properly. My goal with this large-scale piece was to engulf the viewer with



David Fox *Lather* 2009

⁴ Patterson Sims, *Anxious objects: Willie Cole's favorite brands*, (Montclair: Montclair Art

something they think they know or understand, yet question at the same time. Since its arrival, installation art has challenged people's perception of art and where art resides. Artists are constantly changing the formal aspects of displaying art. Whether it is by deconstructing a gallery space or using light to change the visual perception of a museum. Art spaces are just as empowering as any other material or medium.⁵ Not only do these white objects engulf the viewer, they also take over the gallery space. Some elements appear to be coming out of the walls and sinking into the floor.

Lather also represents a literal statement of my making process informed by the installation's title. Lather is defined as both an action and a thing. We can make a lather of bubbles by lathering soap in our hands. The word lather is also an informal way of saying someone is in a state of nervous excitement. I wanted the viewer to experience this feeling as it pertains to how I feel when I am making something.

The piece titled *Underneath* is a cone shaped blown glass form mirrored and painted with black lines representing air vents on the underside of the piece. Attached at the base of the piece is a red cord that is piercing the wall. The piece is about 9 feet up on the wall and protrudes almost 2 feet out. Directly below is an



David Fox *Underneath* 2009

Museum, 2006) 4.

⁵ Judith Collins, *Sculpture Today*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2007), 346.

electrical outlet with a red cord plugged into it. The tail end of the cord leads into the wall as if it is connected to the cord up above. At first glance this piece looks as if it is plugged in and doing something. Because of its height the viewer has to strain their neck to look up at the piece. Similarly they have to look down at the plug and try to make a visual connection. This interaction and participation with the viewer is critical to the completion of my work for this exhibition.

Because there is a distinctly large gap between the two elements, viewers have to look up and down many times to connect the pieces. They have to actively participate in seeing the piece. All the pieces in my exhibition, aside from *Lather*, are reflective. All the glass elements have been mirrored or have black paint behind them, which acts as a dark mirror. This reflective quality not only brings the viewer into the piece but also reflects the viewer within the gallery environment. I want the viewer to think about what it is they are doing at that moment of engaging the work. By noticing their own reflection in the mirror they become aware of their own presence. *Use Sparingly* is a linear piece consisting of 7 blown glass pieces hanging on the wall representing the 7 days of the week.



Each glass element has a spray bottle nozzle on top of it which points directly away from the wall and into the face of the viewer. The mirrored surface reads as the liquid contents of each piece. Starting with the first piece, which represents Monday, the contents are full. The mirror drops in volume in each piece thereafter until reaching empty with the last piece, Sunday. Sunday is still reflective as it is painted black and produces a dark mirror. These pieces represent our routines within each week, and how at the end of the week we are drained. What is ironic is our willingness to start the routine all over again each week. *Table Top* has five blown glass elements that stand on top of a large glass table. Each piece is mirrored and has a brush for a base. Each piece also has a red LED light implying that these objects are operating. The table is 18 inches off the ground and has a black glass top, which acts as a reflective surface.



David Fox *Table Top* 2009

The table is covered in dust and where each glass piece stands there is a trail of clean wiped glass. These pieces represent familiar devices we use to do our

cleaning. They reference vacuums, dusters, and scrubbers. When approached they seem as if they are moving or as if they are functioning because of the red LED. However these objects have no function. The only thing they are doing is reflecting the viewer and the surroundings.

Similarly, *Cornered*, which reads like a surveillance camera, seems to be recording because of the red LED. However, it is only implying that the object is doing something that the viewer conjures up. It is a 5-inch convex piece of glass mirrored and cut to fit in a 90-degree corner. Because of its shape and placement *Cornered* has the most impact with



David Fox *Cornered* 2009

the least amount of effort. It is the pinnacle of my thesis exhibition as it provokes viewers into questioning everything in the exhibition. This little glass element causes people to think and actively engage these works of art by asking themselves questions.

Conclusion

The title of my exhibition, *The Remains of the Day*, is in reference to sitting down at the end of the day and contemplating all that one has done. In our busy lives we very rarely have time to think about our day. I am asking people to find self-reflection in everything they do. If we stop and think about what it is we are doing, why we are doing it and what we are doing it with, we may understand something differently than before. By offering viewers a chance to re-think these familiar acts, things, and places I believe I am reminding them to embrace these everyday phenomena.

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Exhibition Images



The Remains of the Day

April 3 - 27, 2009

Rochester Pin-Up Gallery

Rochester, NY



Pedestal Tub (knob side detail)

MDF, enamel, hardware, blown and mirrored glass

48" x 28" x 28" 2009



Table Top

blown and mirrored glass, mixed media
dimensions variable
2009



Use Sparingly

blown and mirrored glass, paint, spray
bottle nozzle
each approx. 16" x 12" x 8"
2009



Cornered
blown and mirrored glass, mixed media
6" x 3" x 3"
2009



Underneath

blown and mirrored glass, paint,
extension cord
dimensions variable
2009



Lather

blown glass, spray paint
dimensions variable
2009